

Wynne Leon (00:02)

Welcome to How to Share, a podcast that celebrates the art of teaching, learning, giving, and growing.

I'm Wynne Leon and in this episode, co-host Vicki Atkinson and I are with bestselling author, Alyson Richman. Alyson gives us the elevator pitch for her latest historical novel, *The Missing Pages*. She tells us how she was inspired by a story her daughter heard about the real life figure of Harry Elkins Widener, who died at age 27 on the Titanic.

Alyson has the amazing ability to inhabit the time periods she writes about. And they are different for each of her 12 bestselling novels. She tells us about her research process and how her insatiable curiosity helps to drive her storytelling and writing. We talk about the unexpected gifts in writing. In this case, the story her daughter Charlotte brought home from a Harvard campus tour.

Alyson reminds us that you have to be open to receive unexpected gifts and the goodness that flows from them. Alyson has done that beautifully in this book, embodying both the mother and son's viewpoint, as well as the rich historical context in her gripping story. It's a ghost story, a mystery, a bibliophile adventure, and love story all wrapped up in one delicious book.

This is a wonderful conversation with an incredible author and a fantastic book. We know you'll love it.

Alyson Richman (01:51)  
you

you

Hi, so nice to see you today.

Wynne Leon (02:10)

Vicki and I are so excited to talk with you. Your book, *The Missing Pages*, just launched yesterday, October 14th, and we loved it.

Alyson Richman (02:22)  
Thank you.

Wynne Leon (02:23)

We got to just start there. loved it. Can you give us the elevator pitch for *The Missing Pages*?

Alyson Richman (02:30)

Sure, absolutely. So the elevator pitch for the missing pages is Harry Elkins Widener, a 27-year-old Harvard graduate, *Gilded Age* book collector, boards the Titanic holding a rare and precious book. ~ When the catastrophe hits the ship, his mother who is traveling with him pleads for him to board the lifeboat with her.

But instead he tells his mother he has to go back to his cabin to retrieve a rare and precious book and he 's never seen again nor the book

ever found. After his death, his mother builds the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library in his honor. And in her behest, she specifies that every week fresh flowers should be put on his desk in the memorial room to conjure up the sensation that at any moment his spirit can pull down one of the books and sit down and read. And there's a parallel

storyline of a modern day college Harvard college student who was working in the library and begins to suspect that Harry's ghost is trying to communicate from you know the other side and and to urge her to find a missing chapter of his story.

Wynne Leon (03:41)

So good. love how you set up those two stories within the book. You write that ~ your daughter's summer enrichment program tour of Harvard sparked the idea for this book. Can you tell us more about that story?

Alyson Richman (04:03)

Yes.

I don't.

Thank you.

Vicki Atkinson (04:22)

out for me also win.

Alyson Richman (04:33)

percent

Wynne Leon (04:34)

Alyson, can you hear us?

Alyson Richman (04:38)

This ~ legend.

was so strange, it's a ghost.

Wynne Leon (05:05)

Yeah, you just froze up on that part and

Alyson Richman (05:09)

I'm

looking at my internet connection and it's good. Should I mean, do we need to start over?

Wynne Leon (05:15)

No, let's start with that question. I'll just ask that question again.

Alyson Richman (05:18)

It's

not it's not a problem ~

Wynne Leon (05:22)  
That

is no problem at all. That's nothing. ~

Vicki Atkinson (05:26)  
But I have to say, I like that Harry's making an appearance. That's kind of fun, right? Yeah.

Alyson Richman (05:33)  
I have to tell you this, like a lot of weird things are happening on my podcast interviews. Like one of the interviewers yesterday said, and I couldn't see him. He was like, I don't know. He was in like Chicago and he ~ asked me where Charlotte ended up going to college. And I said, MIT. And he said, this is so strange. I'm wearing an MIT sweatshirt today and I wear MIT. I bought this on my last trip to like Boston. he like had it. I mean, that's just kind of kooky. Wow.

He was during the same question too, when he was like, tell me about your daughter. And I started telling her and then he was like, where did she end up going to school? Almost the same.

Wynne Leon (06:12)  
Mm-hmm. ~

Vicki Atkinson (06:15)  
I mean, it's a little departure, but you know, if I don't bring it up while we're like in the recording mode, your references to the WT Stead book, I've heard of that before. I want to read that now. You know, in Harry's use of, know, a ghost will do what a ghost can, but we need to be ready to receive was just such a beautiful thread in the book because things aren't always overly dramatic, but you have to be aware and vile it was. just, my gosh, I'm so exuberant about the book.

Yeah.

Alyson Richman (06:45)  
Thank you. Okay.

Wynne Leon (06:47)  
We love the book. We love how you bring those two stories together. Can you tell us about how your daughter's summer enrichment program tour of Harvard sparked the idea for this book?

Alyson Richman (06:59)  
Absolutely. So my daughter was doing a summer enrichment program at Wellesley College, my own alma mater, and they had coordinated different tours around the Boston area, different universities and colleges for the children. So my daughter was not with me when she took the tour of Harvard. But when the tour guide got to the steps of the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library, he shared the story behind the library, that this beautiful monument was created by Eleanor Elkins Widener.

Her son, who was a Harvard graduate, was on the Titanic. supposedly, according to the tour guide, this legend was that she had room on her lifeboat and begged for him to get on the lifeboat with her. And he told his mother that he had to go back to his cabin to retrieve this rare and precious book. He was never seen again. The book never found. To this day, fresh flowers are still put

on his original desk and chairs in the Memorial Room in the library. when my daughter shared this story with me, she just shared it because she thought it was an incredible story. Immediately as a novelist, I was emotionally drawn to this story because I could see both from the position of the mother begging to her son to get on the lifeboat with him, even though she knew that most probably he had to stay behind because he was.

Vicki Atkinson (08:06)  
you

Alyson Richman (08:19)  
you know, a gentleman and he was 27 years old, he was not a child. But I could also see it from the perspective of the son wanting to give a gift to his mother of hope that he actually might get on the next lifeboat. And he just had to go back to his cabin to get a book and she'd be okay if she just let the lifeboat be lowered into the cold Atlantic water and be saved herself. And so that sort of way of looking at a story from two different directions was instantly intriguing to me on an emotional level.

But then I started to think, well, was there any credibility that there was a book so precious to Harry that he actually did go back to retrieve it? And that sent me on this scavenger hunt to find out what archival material existed of what book that might be. I actually traveled to London to go to the Quaritch bookstore to read the letters of leading up to what book he was purchasing. Even after he died, the letter that Quaritch wrote to

Harry's Philadelphia books seller Rosenbaum saying if a body is washed ashore that has a book in its breast pocket, Harry told me before he left the store that this book was so precious to him, he was never going to take it off his person. So that was, know, she gave she gifted me this story. And I guess it was I just couldn't shake it from my mind. Yeah.

Wynne Leon (09:35)  
See why. Now did the book that he actually bought, was it the little Bacon?

Alyson Richman (09:39)  
Yes, it was. It wasn't.

Vicki Atkinson (09:42)  
So amazing. And your embracing of that wasn't unlike the story of Violet, you know, that you tell about being open to kind of the magic, the

mystery, the wonder and following your instinct. And a lot of that is emotional. So we just amazing.

Wynne Leon (10:04)

So true. So your bio says your books are inspired by art, history and travel. And you know, that must partially be time travel because you hit different time periods for your book. And I don't know how you do it because we have, the early 1900s and in this book, *The Missing Pages* got the World War Two era and the aftermath in *The Lost Wife* We've got the late 1970s in *The Timekeepers*

How do you make that magic? I how does your research help you to write about all those different periods?

Alyson Richman (10:41)

I I am a insatiably curious person. I love learning about things that I don't know about before I start researching a book. So I actively choose subjects where I need to learn more because usually every novel I spend at least a year researching before I actually sit down to write. I like to describe my research process that after I've read as much as I possibly can do, I can...

go to the places to see the landscape of the countries I'm writing about. In the case of *The Missing Pages* it was going to London and walking in the footsteps of Harry before he boarded the Titanic, going to his ancestral home outside Philadelphia at Lynnewood Hall, going to all those places, absorbing the memories of what they visually look like, the energy there, pretending I really am seeing the world through my character's lenses. Then once I've...

understood that and processed it and done my due diligence to understand, you if I'm writing about World War II, it's about understanding what, you know, Czechoslovakia was like during World War II and what politically was happening in the headlines, all those things I have to understand before I start writing a single sentence. But once I do understand the different pieces, and I, you know, I'd like to also credit my father who as an engineer told me to understand something completely, you need to be able to take it apart and understand how to reassemble all the pieces.

together. Once I can do that, that's when I start the writing process. but to answer more specifically your question, when I get to the end of writing one of my historical novels, I've answered the questions in my head that were originally making me curious to begin with. I always feel very satisfied that, you know, even if the book doesn't end up being an incredible bestseller, at least I've learned something and answered those original questions in my head. Right.

Wynne Leon (12:34)

One of our favorite interviews with another of our favorite authors, Barbara Nickless she said that her husband said, why don't you write a book that doesn't require so much research? She's like, I don't want to do that.

Vicki Atkinson (12:45)

Ha ha ha!

Yeah, but we hear your father's wisdom in all of that. has a background in engineering too, I absolutely do not. But that the urgency that you feel to absorb as much as you can, that has to be difficult at times to exercise patience, to continue gathering and to not veer off and begin to even

It just sketch out storylines. You really refrain from doing all of that until the research is done. Or are you inspired in your head and you hold those things but don't?

Alyson Richman (13:26)

So I don't actually do an outline for any of my books. So what I am an intuitive writer and I like to write organically the way a painter fills out a paint, a canvas, brushstroke upon brushstroke to make the shape and the landscape. I like to do that sentence by sentence. I always know the end of how my book is going to end. And I a tremendous amount of time thinking of the way into a story. How am I gonna grab?

into the narrative and make you feel tethered to the characters and emotionally anchored to them, but also learn something without it feeling didactic, like you're reading a history book. So there's a lot of mental assembly of all the building blocks of what I think are gonna make a good story before I sit down to write. The case of The Missing Pages

I really felt that it was going to be the best way to tell the story and make it as fresh as possible and not just another Titanic story was to tell the story from the voice of Harry's ghost inside the library his mother built in his honor. Because I mean, a ghost is the ultimate omniscient narrator, right? Yeah. Tell you what happened in the past, but he can also sort of hover around and be very much observant of the present.

Vicki Atkinson (14:34)

right.

Alyson Richman (14:45)

And so his voice in The Missing Pages I think is really unique because he's, like to say he's my most soulful character yet.

Wynne Leon (14:53)

Is it good enough? Yeah? Yeah?

Alyson Richman (14:56)

He's been able to inhabit his mother's library since its inception. He recognizes the lengths that his mother went to make this for him and to house his books. But now young Violet walks into the library with her own grief and needing direction. And you learn why he's chosen her to uncover his missing chapter. But the portal into this story was getting Harry's voice. It would have been a very different.

story if I had just done the whole thing in third person and just told you about Harry's life and what happened. But you become, hopefully, more

emotionally engaged because you're hearing in his own words. His voice inhabits the pages of the book.

Wynne Leon (15:37)

Right. Well, one of the lines that I love from your book is any book lover will tell you that to read a book is to open yourself to a new world. You've that so beautifully.

Vicki Atkinson (15:37)

Yeah.

You

Alyson Richman (15:51)

Thank you.

Vicki Atkinson (15:52)

And just the description of the, I think the Memorial Library and the room within, know, for anyone, and I've never been to the Widener Library, but I think there's just so much poignancy about what his mother did. It's a true story, you know, to honor him and even, you know, just there's so much to love about.

You know, just the continuing thread about the flowers and the meaning that they held and that he might walk back in at any moment, know, and truer. Yeah.

Alyson Richman (16:29)

I mean,

I believe that his spirit somehow lived within the library. And I think that is why this sense of making it feel eternally alive with the flowers was so important to her. Their records and letters that she wrote to Rosenbach, the family's bookseller, that she had books delivered to their home.

you know, for Christmas that he would have wanted and would sit in his bedroom with those books to be close. I as a mother, I try not to cry, think about, you know, this. So it's just so emotional because also I of course don't portray her as being completely flawless. Grief can sometimes make us behave in ways that we're not always proud of, you know, but it's all encompassing the loss

of a loved one, know, whether it's your beloved or if it's your child or your spouse and how do we find a way to channel that grief into something that memorializes the person you loved in the truest, purest, most beautiful way. And I think what she did for Harry with this library is incredible. It's an absolutely beautiful, beautiful.

walk in and also just, you you mentioned before like how you visualize the memorial room with his desk and the mantle with this portrait there. When you enter the library, everything is sort of white marble with this, you know, these steps that walk up and in the center of the steps is the varnished wood, the warmth of this memorial room that contrasts

against the white marble on the outside. So it really feels like the dark part within a body. It is so beautiful and so powerful that you cannot help but think that it is this like eternal flame within this.

Wynne Leon (18:29)  
Right.

Vicki Atkinson (18:29)  
Yeah.

Well, and Harry was also kind of cheeky, you know, and some of the reveals about his behavior because he, in many ways, was waiting for Violet, you know, and she finally arrived. I loved there's a mention of him describing himself as sort of a crafty ghost and thinking about the other students and a student named Oliver, who was a poor library page.

Harry's just lurking and waiting to make a connection and dropping a \$20 bill innocently. But there's so much heart in the story about his space and what his mother did for him and how he exists for those that can connect. just so beautiful.

Wynne Leon (19:19)  
You're right. Here he is cheeky. I love one of his lines. My grandfather once told me that he heard Mr. Morgan say, a man always has two reasons for doing anything. A good reason and the real reason.

Vicki Atkinson (19:34)  
Yeah,

that was so good. Yeah. Yeah.

Wynne Leon (19:36)  
good.

You know, and you have the three cornerstones from real life. Harry Elkins Widener his demise on the Titanic, and this memorial library. Is it helpful to have those cornerstones when writing a historical novel?

Alyson Richman (19:54)  
I think when writing historical novel which is extremely helpful are there certain facts that you know that you want to share with your read, they become like the materials of building your house. And so I knew right away that the library was going to play a very important role and how Eleanor decides to do this and also how Harry inhabits those rooms.

That I definitely knew. mean, there was a tremendous amount of research I had to do to understand the Titanic and the scenes of where he could have met Ada, his bookseller that he meets when he's in London. as much time as it takes to do the historical research, I'm grateful for those building blocks because they anchor the story. And I know that once you finish any of my novels,



you're going to have learned something new that you didn't know before you started.

Wynne Leon (20:48)  
So

Vicki Atkinson (20:48)  
Absolutely. And I think you're giving life, I think, to Eleanor's story. And as you said, all that she did for her son, where one could go and do all the factual research that you did, but threading together the story and the meaning of his life and the contributions that he made, not far beyond just the edifice. There was a line where

his mother said at the library, his room was a eulogy written not in ink and paper, but in mortar and stone. And I think what you've written in Missing Pages continues that resonance. They live on. There's a richness there.

Wynne Leon (21:33)  
Yeah, beautiful. Speaking of living on in a different way, you have a book called The Lost Wife that's being adapted for the big screen. How does that process and does it take your time?

Alyson Richman (21:34)  
Beautiful.

Vicki Atkinson (21:35)  
Yeah.

Yeah.

Alyson Richman (21:48)  
These years of my time. It's an ongoing process. you know, there's there's three steps to getting a film. mean, getting a book adaptation to the silver screen. And the first is, the option where someone comes and says they think this would make a great movie and they would like the ability to to see if they can take it to the next level. And then the second level is actually where someone starts financing, putting the script together, attaching talent to it. And then the

Vicki Atkinson (21:51)  
You

Wynne Leon (21:51)  
Any more of your time?

Alyson Richman (22:17)  
The last and the most difficult place to get to is production when the camera starts rolling and you have the tens of millions of dollars that are necessary to making a World War II drama like The Lost Wives. So I'm in the middle. There is a beautiful script. There is a beautiful director attached. We've had actresses come in and come off. So we're in that limbo stage. And I have been told by the people in charge that,

It is not unusual that it can take so long, that it's just a matter of all the pieces coming together. That's where it's at right now. In the meantime, I am so busy writing my books. In the beginning, I tried to get excited with every new development, but I've decided it's much better to just focus on the writing.

Vicki Atkinson (23:00)

riding a wave, right? Yeah, that could be. It's so exciting, though.

Alyson Richman (23:05)

I

can see a script created by a really wonderful screenwriter who ~ is able to maintain the essence of the book and ticks, you know, compelling and translate that into a screenplay is really a wonderful process to witness.

Wynne Leon (23:20)

Yeah, and I bet amazing and probably a little puzzling too because it's like your words, but

Alyson Richman (23:26)

Yeah. also, you know, to, don't know if you've read *The Lost Wife*, but it also goes back and forth between modern day and going back into the past. How you pivot and change direction of going back into the past and into the modern day storyline. It's one thing in but when you're doing a movie, you really have to be clever in those transitions so that it's not, you know,

Wynne Leon (23:55)

Fascinating.

Alyson Richman (23:56)

Yeah, so that was really interesting. He did a good job on that.

Wynne Leon (23:59)

Yeah, well,

it feels it sort of feels unfair for me to ask this question because obviously you've got this book, you're doing a book tour, you've got the movie, but what do you what what are you working on now other than all those things?

Alyson Richman (24:17)

Yes, you knew right to ask because of course I'm always working on something new once you know I finish a book and it goes into production. So I have been writing now, I finished the research a few months ago, but I just started writing ~ my new novel which is called *The Golden Ribbon* and it's about Edith Wharton's time in Paris during World War I where she worked with Belgian children refugees that she sponsored to come from war-torn Belgium to Paris.

And she created these amazing hostels for them to live in. And many of them had lay schools in which to teach them a Belgian tradition so that

they'd have a skill once the war ended. And then there's a dual timeline with what happened in 2005 with her country estate, the Mount in Lenox, Massachusetts, with them trying to get the existing volumes of her library back on the shelves there.

and what happened and how they were able to succeed in doing that.

Wynne Leon (25:17)  
Wow.

Vicki Atkinson (25:18)  
Those dual timelines, you you are so deft at doing that, you know, in The Missing Pages So we look forward to reading that. my gosh. And Missing Pages is just a delight for book lovers, history lovers, people who love Titanic stories, but this is unlike any other. And then just a little, just a soup con of paranormal, just a little bit, just, you know, just for fun.

my gosh, and I have to ask you a question. Was there really an electric camel on the Titanic? There was. your research at work.

Alyson Richman (25:56)  
the Turkish baths, all of those things, were really, had, you know, if you can just imagine the Titanic at that time being billed as the playground for the rich, I mean, the amenities that they had, mean, the ala carte restaurant, know, the veranda and the Palm Court, I mean, there were so many, was, you know, Carnival Cruise and then make it, know, possibly as it could be and everything.

So know that everything in there that I write is all true.

Wynne Leon (26:29)  
Amazing.

Vicki Atkinson (26:31)  
His mother's

party planning that she was doing on board. was if she had the resources, you know, of the world around her yet. Yeah, it was a floating little edifice, right?

Alyson Richman (26:43)  
And I love doing the research on the Widener family because they are truly the American dream come true on how they got their wealth. Harry's grandfather was a butcher who sold mutton to the Union army, made a fortune to that during the Civil War, took that money and put it into Philadelphia's expanding transportation system with their trolley cars, made a fortune with that and put it into US Steel. And the self-made man created this huge wealth and, you know,

Lynnewood Hall, which I described in the book, which was Harry's ancestral home that he lived with his grandparents and his parents and his aunt and uncle. It was filled with the most priceless art you can imagine. I mean, there was a Rembrandt room, a Raphael room, Titian's and

Vermeer's and a Tiffany stained glass window in Eleanor's tea room. mean, just incredible.

Vicki Atkinson (27:37)

Yeah, and beautiful that the reader gets to revisit that location, you know, decades, decades later, right?

Wynne Leon (27:46)

And such an interesting point that Eleanor wanted to fund Harry's library with her own money.

Alyson Richman (27:52)

She became so angry when newspapers would insinuate that it was her father-in-law. Harry's father died as well. So she was a widow and she had lost her son. She still had two remaining children at home. But she really wanted the world to know that this was going to be an endeavor from a mother's heart and from her own purse strings.

Wynne Leon (28:14)

Amazing.

Vicki Atkinson (28:15)

and your mother's heart was engaged, right? The story of how the story came to you, right?

Alyson Richman (28:20)

Yeah,

exactly. I was doing an interview yesterday and someone said, you there's a synergy of when your daughter gifted you this story. And it's, it's true. My daughter was entering a stage in her, and I'm going to get weepy, in her life where she was about to embark on a new chapter. You know, she was applying for college. She was going to be going off on her own. And this was the gift that I started writing this book when she did go off to college.

Vicki Atkinson (28:48)

Yeah.

Alyson Richman (28:49)

When you're open to the way the world gives you these unexpected gifts and what you do with those gifts and if you're a creator channeling them in a way to do something that you find soulfully satisfying and that you're contributing to hopefully make the world just a little better, it's a good thing. So I really, I feel very indebted to my daughter. The book is dedicated to her.

She's going to be, you know, she, I mentioned it before, she's at MIT now, but she's coming to the Harvard bookstore for my event next week. ~ know, it's just a circle. It's just really beautiful.

Vicki Atkinson (29:28)

So good. So much in life is about knowing when and how to receive. I think Harry would approve of that. You have to be ready.

Alyson Richman (29:36)

And you have to be ready and open and also realize that you need to put your own energy behind it too to make it happen. like Eleanor

Wynne Leon (29:47)

Right? my gosh, there's so many. I love how you've taken your unexpected gift and given it to us because The Missing Pages is really, really good and a gift for sure. Thank you.

Alyson Richman (30:01)

Thank you for reading it so carefully in this wonderful discussion that we're having.

Vicki Atkinson (30:06)

my gosh, it was truly our pleasure. And we had so much fun exchanging thoughts about things that we loved and the delight. think that's, you it's a beautiful story. We learned a lot, but there was delight, ~ you know, throughout, which I think readers will just, yeah, we're wishing you all the best because this will be a beloved book. We just know it.

Alyson Richman (30:29)

Well, thank you so much. hope so. I hope it reaches lots of readers.

Wynne Leon (30:34)

We do too. Yeah. Thank you, Alyson

Vicki Atkinson (30:37)

Thank

you.

Alyson Richman (30:38)

Wonderful chatting with you. I so appreciate you giving me time to talk about the book. ~

Vicki Atkinson (30:43)

Our pleasure, all the best.

Alyson Richman (30:45)

Thank you too. I hope to see you again soon. Thank you. lovely.

Wynne Leon (30:53)

Thank you for listening. Our music was written for us by the incredible duo of Jack Canfora and Rob Koenig. For show notes and more great inspiration see [avitiva.com](http://avitiva.com) ~

Alyson Richman (31:11)

you